



Creating a Classroom Tiriti with Young Learners: A Pathway to Understanding Te Tiriti o Waitangi

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INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022), educators are encouraged to engage students in understanding the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand society, shaped by Te **Tiriti o Waitangi**. **This curriculum refresh emphasises Māori history** as foundational and ongoing, examining how colonisation and settlement have shaped the nation and highlighting the importance of reflecting on these processes. The goal is to foster an inclusive and culturally responsive education system that equips students to contribute meaningfully to Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse society (Ministry of Education, 2022).

This reflection explores how Riverdale Primary School teaches Te Tiriti o Waitangi through its inquiry-based learning framework, Te Ako Ritenga (Riverdale Primary School, 2023). The reflection focuses on a 10-week inquiry in the *Pae Ake* classroom (year 2 & 3), where students explore Te Tiriti o Waitangi by examining its articles and principles – paying special attention to the relationships, perspectives, and negotiations that shaped it – and then collaboratively develop their own classroom tiriti [treaty] that outlines expected learning behaviours within their classroom community. This approach illustrates how interactive and culturally responsive teaching methods can enhance students' understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, helping them see it as a living document that continues to shape our country. By moving beyond traditional history lessons that focus on memorised facts, such as key dates and notable figures, students are encouraged to explore the process involved in developing agreements like Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including the diverse relationships and perspectives that shape them. As a result, students develop a more meaningful connection to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its ongoing relevance in Aotearoa.

Riverdale Primary School

Located in Palmerston North, Riverdale Primary School serves students from **Years 1 to 6, with approximately 21% identifying as Māori. The school's vision, "Empowering successful inquiring learners," is supported by its Ngā Matapono** [principles]: Ariki [Leadership], Tohunga [Excellence], Mangotoa [Self-management], and Aronui [Creativity] (Riverdale Primary School, 2023). These principles aim to build confidence, creativity, communication skills, and self-management in students, preparing them for success in school and beyond.

Te Ako Ritenga framework

Riverdale School's Te Ako Ritenga framework (Riverdale Primary School, 2023) promotes a student-centred, inquiry-based learning approach that encourages engagement through curiosity-driven exploration. Rather than following a linear path, the Te Ako Ritenga model is designed as a spiral, representing the ongoing revisiting and questioning that characterises effective inquiry learning (Ministry of Education, 2015; Sinnema & Aitken, 2015).



Figure 1: Te Ako Ritenga framework

The framework includes several stages:

- Hook (Immersion): Engages students with the topic, assessing their interests, attitudes, and prior knowledge.
- Wonder (Question and Brainstorm): Encourages students to form questions and make connections to guide their inquiry.

- Reflect (Stop and Think): Allows students to refine their questions, plan, and set future directions.
- Explore (Organise and Investigate): Facilitates the gathering and processing of information while fostering teamwork and problem-solving.
- Act (Celebrate and Innovate): Supports students in presenting their findings, applying new learning, and linking it to real-world contexts.
- Reflect (Evaluate): Regularly evaluates each stage of the process, helping students think critically about their learning strategies.

DEVELOPING A CLASSROOM TIRITI: INTEGRATING LEARNING ABOUT TE TIRITI O WAITANGI

The Pae Ake classroom is a flexible learning environment that serves as a bridge between the Junior and Senior Schools at Riverdale Primary. In 2023, the class included 59 students, predominantly Year 3 learners, with one Year 2 student. The class had a nearly even gender split, with 45% male and 55% female, and 22% **identifying as Māori. Led by a team of three teachers with diverse yet complementary skills**, Pae Ake fosters a collaborative teaching approach that enriches educational outcomes and strengthens the relationships between students and teachers.

Each year, classrooms at Riverdale Primary develop a ‘classroom tiriti,’ a set of guidelines outlining expected learning behaviours within the classroom community. In Term 1, Pae Ake took this responsibility further by embarking on a 10-week inquiry into Aotearoa New Zealand history, focusing on tiriti-making and an in-depth exploration of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This inquiry allowed students to draw connections between the significance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the creation of their own classroom tiriti, actively engaging them in the process while also providing teachers an opportunity to expand their understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi alongside their students.

Introduction to the Pae Ake Tiriti-Making Process

The tiriti-making process in the Pae Ake classroom was not just an exercise in rule-setting but a profound learning experience that connected students, teachers, and the wider Riverdale School community to the historical, cultural, and ongoing significance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This process was guided by **Riverdale Primary’s Te Ako Ritenga inquiry**-based framework, which allowed students to develop an understanding of democratic processes, communication, and the principles of equity and justice through a structured, iterative learning journey.

It is important to acknowledge that the concept of tiriti-making, as used in **this classroom, drew on both Māori and colonial traditions. While** Te Tiriti o Waitangi originated from a colonial intent to establish a legal framework for governing Aotearoa New Zealand, **Māori communities** have long used various forms of agreement-making among hapū, **though these were not always formalised in the same way.** This process in Pae Ake encouraged students to reflect on how tiriti-making has evolved over time, blending **Māori** values of consensus and collective responsibility with structured democratic practices introduced through colonial influence.

This is how we used the Te Ako Ritenga stages as a guide:

- Hook (Immersion): Students were introduced to Te Tiriti o Waitangi¹, sparking curiosity about their similarities and differences. This stage engaged students with prior knowledge, attitudes, and questions about the role of agreements, particularly Te Tiriti, within Aotearoa.
- Wonder (Question and Brainstorm): Students began forming questions around **Te Tiriti's significance and making connections to their classroom context**, guiding their inquiry and identifying aspects of Te Tiriti that felt most relevant to them.
- Reflect (Stop and Think): In this phase, students paused to refine their questions and plan next steps. They examined the articles and principles of Te Tiriti, focusing on the varied relationships, perspectives, and negotiations that shaped its signing. This exploration led to discussions on how communication across different cultural groups could lead to misunderstandings, particularly given the contrasting worldviews of **Māori and colonial representatives. Students considered how the colonial origins of Te Tiriti introduced complexities in its interpretation and application, as Māori concepts of agreement-making among hapū** [local tribes], founded in collective values and expressed in **te reo Māori** [Māori language], sometimes conflicted with the structured, written agreements favoured by colonial authorities. Through this reflection, students considered how differences in language and worldview contributed to lasting misunderstandings.
- Explore (Organise and Investigate): In this stage, students were divided into their **three whānau groups**, with each group selecting students to act as rangatira [leaders] to represent them in negotiating the terms of **a classroom tiriti. These rangatira ensured that their group's perspectives** were voiced, nurturing leadership skills, accountability, and a sense of ownership. Initially, students proposed specific rules, but as they progressed, they shifted toward broader, principle-based goals, reflecting **wānanga** [Māori processes of collaborative learning and discussion] practices of negotiation, compromise, and consensus-building (Berryman et al., 2018).
- Act (Celebrate and Innovate): After finalising the classroom tiriti, students celebrated by collaboratively presenting their agreed-upon values and expected behaviours within the classroom community. This stage linked their learning to real-world contexts, helping them see their tiriti as more than a set of rules, but as a foundation for community, respect, and mutual understanding.
- Reflect (Evaluate): Throughout the process, students regularly reflected on their learning strategies and group dynamics, critically evaluating how their understanding of te Tiriti and democratic principles evolved and noting how the concept of tiriti-making empowered them to shape their environment actively.

¹ English version of Te Tiriti o Waitangi with notable differences in meanings between the Māori and English versions. For more details, see <https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-tiriti-o-waitangi-the-treaty-of-waitangi/page-2>.

Through the processes of the Te Ako Ritenga inquiry-based framework, the classroom tiriti (Figure 2) **evolved from a simple list of rules, such as "don't run in the classroom" and "listen when others are speaking,"** into a values-driven document. This transformation moved students beyond token compliance, fostering an enhanced understanding of the principles guiding respectful and inclusive behaviour. They learned the skills required to work collectively, such as negotiating, developing a shared understanding of key concepts, and enhancing communication skills. The classroom tiriti became a foundation for building community, fostering respect, and promoting mutual understanding, empowering students to see themselves as active contributors with a voice in shaping and influencing their environment.



Figure 2: Te Tiriti o Pae Ake

Community Engagement and Experiential Learning

The Pae Ake classroom leveraged the knowledge and expertise of whānau members and community leaders to develop students' understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Involving kaumātua [elders] and parents, who shared stories and insights from their tūpuna [ancestors], enriched the students' learning by connecting them to personal and ancestral narratives. This partnership between the school and the community was crucial in making the learning experience more authentic, relevant, and impactful.

One significant learning experience involved a "tug-of-war" activity, symbolising the shifting power dynamics between tāngata whenua [Indigenous people] and manuhiri [visitors] following the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This activity provided students with a visceral understanding of how tāngata whenua gradually lost control and authority as more manuhiri arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand. By physically and emotionally engaging with this power imbalance,

students gained deeper insight into the significance of events that occurred after the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi **and its lasting impact on Māori communities**. The reflection on this activity helped students connect the historical power imbalance to contemporary issues, fostering greater awareness of the ongoing **struggles faced by tāngata whenua and the importance of upholding Māori rights** today. This empathy extended beyond history, encouraging students to critically consider equity and justice in modern Aotearoa New Zealand society. For teachers, the success of the tug-of-war highlighted the value of experiential learning, demonstrating how hands-on, participatory activities can enhance student engagement and deepen understanding, especially when exploring culturally and historically significant topics.

Ceremonial Signing: A Culmination of Learning

The term's learning journey culminated in the ceremonial signing of the classroom tiriti, an event planned and executed by the students with guidance from their teachers and **kaumātua**. **This ceremony was a significant learning experience that reinforced the importance of tikanga [customs] in Māori culture**. Students divided responsibilities, prepared waiata [songs] and karakia [prayers], and organised a celebratory kai [meal], learning about the practicalities of event planning, teamwork, and leadership in the process.

On the day of the signing, the event was conducted according to the tikanga learned throughout the term, beginning with a whakatau [formal welcome] that led students and guests into a state of tapu: an elevated status that honoured the significance of their commitment as they spoke about and each individually signed the Pae Ake classroom tiriti. The atmosphere was imbued with a strong sense of wairua [spiritual essence], as students, teachers, and guests alike felt the depth of connection and respect that permeated the ceremony. This wairua elevated the experience beyond a physical and mental exercise, transforming it into a holistic teaching moment **aligned with tikanga Māori ways of being**. **As the ceremony transitioned into whakanoa**, the lifting of tapu through waiata and shared kai, it became a heartfelt celebration of unity. Through this act, students connected to the historical and cultural weight of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, gaining insight into what their ancestors might have felt when entering into such a profound commitment. This experience enhanced their understanding of the responsibilities and mutual respect embedded in signing a tiriti, strengthening their own sense of commitment to their classroom community.

Disseminating Learning to the Wider School Community

As part of their learning journey, the students at Pae Ake also developed and **performed a short play for the wider Riverdale School community and whānau** [extended family]. This creative endeavour allowed them to synthesise their learning about Te Tiriti o Waitangi in an engaging and accessible format, reinforcing their understanding as they worked to convey key messages and represent historical events meaningfully. The play had a significant impact on the wider community, serving as a catalyst for learning and discussion among parents **and whānau, many of whom gained new insights into** understanding Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This experience highlighted the value of bringing historical and cultural education into community spaces, fostering intergenerational learning

and contributing to a shared understanding and appreciation of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

REFLECTIONS ON THE INQUIRY PROCESS

Developing a classroom tiriti through the lens of Te Tiriti o Waitangi allowed students to move beyond surface-level engagement with treaties and the history of Aotearoa New Zealand. By leading the process, students developed a strong sense of ownership over the values and protocols that would guide their classroom. This inquiry-based approach emphasised the value of the process itself—mirroring the complexities of historical agreement-making and the time required to foster genuine understanding. Involving **whānau and community further enriched the learning, connecting it meaningfully to students' lives and supporting intergenerational engagement with Te Tiriti o Waitangi.**

This journey, including the development of the classroom tiriti, organising the ceremonial signing, and performing a play, was also a powerful catalyst for **teachers' personal and professional reflection. Regular reflective sessions allowed** educators to assess their teaching strategies, identify opportunities for improvement, and enhance their skills as culturally responsive teachers (Berryman, 2018; Fraser & McGee, 2011). The tiriti-making process offered insights into teaching practices, underscoring the value of reflective praxis, adaptability, and collaborative learning. Weekly reflections enabled teachers to adjust their methods based on student feedback, highlighting the need for flexibility when addressing complex historical and cultural topics.

The process served as a reciprocal learning experience grounded in the principle of *ako*, which promotes a mutual teaching and learning relationship (Berryman et al., 2018; Marshall & Wilson, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2009). Engaging in the inquiry alongside students enabled teachers to enhance their own understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, democratic processes, and cultural engagement. This co-learning approach cultivated a collaborative classroom environment that challenged traditional hierarchies, fostering a shared purpose between teachers and students.

The success of the inquiry was enhanced through leveraging of the different skill sets of each teacher. One teacher's life experience and learning from their Te Reo **Māori** course enriched the cultural depth of the inquiry, adding a valuable perspective that resonated with both students and colleagues. Another **teacher's infectious energy and 'have a go' attitude inspired the team to embrace** new ideas and push beyond traditional boundaries, ensuring that the inquiry remained dynamic and engaging. The team leader contributed by making the crucial decision to slow down the process, allowing the inquiry to unfold at a pace that honoured its significance rather than rushing to complete the class tiriti in a short timeframe. This thoughtful approach, combined with the support the teachers provided each other and their ability to leverage each other's strengths, created a collaborative environment that was essential to the success of the inquiry.

Teachers witnessed firsthand the benefits of student-centred learning. Empowering students to develop the classroom tiriti, organise the ceremonial signing, and create a play required teachers to step back and trust the process, providing guidance only when necessary. For the teachers, this was a significant

moment of growth, as it challenged them to trust not only the process but also **each other as a teaching team and the students' capabilities**. This shift reinforced their understanding of collective responsibility and collaboration, highlighting the power of student autonomy in fostering engagement and deeper learning. The transition from a rule-based to a principle-based classroom tiriti underscored the importance of meaningful engagement with cultural and historical themes. Rather than establishing strict rules, students explored values and principles foundational to community agreements, an approach that encouraged critical reflection and the appreciation of shared values within group settings.

Cultural responsiveness emerged as a vital component of effective **teaching. Integrating tikanga Māori and Māori perspectives fostered an inclusive and respectful learning environment** (Berryman, 2018; Fraser & McGee, 2011). This experience reinforced the importance of adaptability and community connection for teachers, who learned alongside their students and the Riverdale community, reinforcing a commitment to providing a culturally rich education. Evidence of this was seen in the growth of student-centred discussions, active **involvement from whānau, and teachers' own reflections on bicultural teaching**, illustrating the benefits of a student-centred and community-engaging approach to understanding historical bicultural relationships and the relevance of Te Tiriti in today's Aotearoa.

CONCLUSION

The tiriti-making project at Pae Ake provided a rich educational experience that moved beyond traditional classroom activities, embracing student-centred inquiry and meaningful community engagement. Through the project, students developed insights into leadership, democratic processes, cultural awareness, and the importance of principles in shaping group agreements. Teachers found renewed value in reflective practice, collaborative learning, and immersive engagement with cultural and historical content.

By involving the wider Riverdale School community, the project fostered an environment of inclusivity, respect, and open dialogue. Rather than simply recounting historical events, students were given the opportunity to actively explore the principles and processes surrounding Te Tiriti o Waitangi, facilitating an enhanced understanding of its importance and continued relevance in Aotearoa New Zealand. Developing a classroom tiriti in this way enabled students to connect with the values of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in a manner that mirrored the complexities of historical negotiation, consensus-building, and adaptation. **Ultimately, this project enriched the school community's appreciation for Te Tiriti o Waitangi, underscoring its enduring significance and inviting continuous engagement with the principles it represents.**

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Sarah Ruawai is a dedicated educator with 36 years of experience, currently teaching at Riverdale Primary School in Palmerston North. Over her extensive career, she has held various roles, including Team Leader, Assistant Principal, Deputy Principal, Special Abilities Teacher, and SENCO, showcasing her broad expertise in primary education across diverse learning settings. Sarah is passionate about her role as a teacher, dedicated to guiding tamariki on their journey to becoming individuals who will positively contribute to society.

She is passionate about creating enriching learning opportunities in the **classroom, particularly focused on fostering a sense of mana in young Māori boys through education. Additionally, Sarah is furthering her Te Reo Māori skills** through part-time studies at Ata Rawea. Contact: sarahr@riverdale.school.nz

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